

SPECIAL TOWN MEETING

The Special Town Meeting was called to order by First Selectwoman Catherine Iino at 7:14 P.M. in the All-Purpose Room of Killingworth Elementary School, 340 Route 81, Killingworth on September 11, 2018, to discuss, but not vote upon, the following item of business:

Shall the Town of Killingworth appropriate \$6,500,000 for the cost of the purchase of approximately 304.11 +/- acres of land comprised of four (4) contiguous parcels, located on 541 Route 148, Birch Mill Road, Route 148 and Schnoor Road in Killingworth, Connecticut, and being identified on the Killingworth Assessor Map 11 as Lot 04, Map 15 as Lot 54, Map 15 as Lot 31 and Map 15 as Lot 53A respectively, as well as temporary and permanent financing costs and other costs associated therewith including, but not limited to, costs of appraisal, environmental studies, title search and title insurance, authorize the issuance of bonds and notes in the amount of \$6,500,000 to finance such appropriation and authorize the purchase of such property?

The pledge of Allegiance was recited and a moment of silence was observed in memory of all those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001.

Regina M. Regolo moved to nominate David W. Gross to serve as Moderator; seconded by Joan Gay. Louis C. Annino moved that nominations be closed; seconded by Joan Gay. Following a voice vote, the motion to close nomination carried unanimously. There being no further nominations and following a voice vote, David Gross was elected to serve as Moderator.

Mr. Gross reviewed the qualifications to vote at the meeting, which will follow Robert's Rules, and noted votes would be conducted by voice unless moved to the contrary. He clarified that the meeting's purpose was not to vote on the purchase of the land but rather to share information.

Town Clerk Dawn Rees Mooney read the call of the meeting. Louis Annino moved to accept the call of the meeting; seconded by Joan Gay. Following a voice vote, the motion carried unanimously.

Mr. Gross further explained that anyone wishing to speak would be given a maximum of three minutes, asked each to state his/her name first and instructed that all questions be directed to the Moderator who would then refer the question to the appropriate party for response. He explained that students from HKHS are videotaping the meeting.

Mrs. Iino reiterated that the purpose of the meeting was neither to vote on the purchase of the land nor decide whether to send the question to referendum. She explained that the meeting will adjourn to a referendum to be held on September 25, 2018 from 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. unless it is voted to open the polls earlier. She also clarified that the cost of the property is \$6,250,000 and the total cost of the bond (\$8,500,000 over 20 years) is already reflected in the projected mill rate increase. She noted that the current property assessment does not indicate its value because of its open space classification.

Eileen Gannon made a motion to extend the hours of voting at the September 25 referendum to 6 a.m.; seconded by Gene Zarcone. Following voice vote, the motion carried unanimously.

Lengthy discussion ensued as follows:

David Gumbart, President of the Killingworth Land Conservation Trust and speaking on their behalf, reviewed the 10 criteria for open space classification as they relate specifically to the Venuti property, noting the property meets the criteria. He urged those in attendance to consider what the residents of Killingworth in 25 to 50 years will think about our decision whether or not to protect this property.

Wayne Davidovich expressed his concerns about the cost of the property to residents, the wisdom of such a purchase and whether the town can really afford it. He noted that protecting this property will not benefit our grandchildren because they won't be able to afford to live in Killingworth.

Michelle Knockwood questioned maintenance of the property, the liability of the lake and who will monitor/patrol it and at what cost. She shared the concern that young adults cannot afford to live in Town. Mrs. Iino indicated that there is no plan for the potential use of the property and estimated annual

maintenance costs at \$9,000 - \$25,000. She explained that if classified as open space, there would be no insurance impact to the town. Mrs. Knockwood further questioned the projected cost to taxpayers and Mrs. Iino explained that a tax increase of \$180/year is a very rough estimate for a median-valued house, not a set amount across the board. Michael Venuti shared his conversation with the Deep River First Selectman regarding Plattwood Park where he stated they have no lifeguards, no high fencing and rely on "Swim at Own Risk" sign with no issue.

Jeffrey Etherington questioned if the Town had its own appraisal and suggested one should have been done for a property of this size. Mrs. Iino noted that the Town had an appraisal done in late 2014.

Moderator David Gross reviewed meeting procedures with the room in response to an out of order resident, and referred the above question to Michael Venuti. Mr. Venuti responded that the Town had several appraisals done, but most recently received a "Yellow Book" appraisal. He discussed "Yellow Book" values compared to market-value appraisals noting they are not comparable and discussion followed. Mrs. Iino stated that the 2014 appraisal was \$2.7M to \$3.2M.

Tia Manzi noted the 2014 appraisal was based on four parcels of land but the Venuti's 2016 value was based on 60 building lots that have not been approved. She questioned if the proposed lots are acceptable building lots in accordance with Killingworth's zoning regulations and suggested the 2016 figure was, therefore, over-valued. Ms. Manzi shared that she personally spoke with the State Trooper who told her that there are many problems with trespassing, fires and out-of-towners at Plattwood Park, and added that the Deep River website states they charge a \$200/season admission fee.

Jeffrey Moeckel asked if the Town does purchase the property and it is designated as Open Space, would hunting and fishing be allowed. Mrs. Iino stated that there is no decision regarding usage.

Kelvin W. Cole shared his concern regarding the property's out of the way location noting the first rule of real estate is "location, location, location". Therefore, he wonders how many residents would actually use the property. He further noted that town residents already have use of thousands of acres of Land Trust property and miles of streams and trails, both within and nearby Killingworth. Mr. Cole also cited access to the Town's parks and watershed land as areas for recreation.

Kim Kelly questioned the process, specifically the logic of voting whether to blindly purchase the property without a proposed use for the land, and also shared her concerns about taxes increasing due to expenses beyond the initial purchase.

Tom Lowell, former Land Conservation Commission member, asked if an A2 survey map with wetlands marked was available. Mr. Venuti noted the map on display was a preliminary subdivision map. Mr. Lowell would like a study of possible use prior to purchase and suggested the Board of Selectmen are "jumping the gun" by voting with no plan how to use the property and no idea about the ongoing insurance and maintenance costs.

Board of Finance member Derek Phelps noted that he urged the Board of Finance to get an updated appraisal and was in favor of sending the question to referendum. He further referenced the \$4.6B state budget deficit the next legislature will face (possibly then increasing to \$6B) and reviewed the process by which the legislature determines how much aid each municipality will receive. He cautioned that approving such a costly land purchase at this point in the state's budget crisis would send a clear message to Hartford that the Town of Killingworth has extra money to spend and does not need state funding.

Heidi Giaccone asked if either the Town or the Venuti family has evaluated the potential cost to the Town of a large development. Mrs. Iino said it's hard to say and discussed educational costs vs. the cost of the property. Mr. Venuti noted that the map showing 60 lots is a preliminary plan, referenced the RSD#17 website's figure of \$21,000 per student and suggested the cost would be \$1.2M if 1 child per house and \$2.4M if 2 children per house and so on.

RSD#17 Board of Education member Suzanne Sack clarified that education costs average \$18,000 to \$20,000 per student, with Killingworth paying 40% and Haddam paying 60% of the total cost discussed. She explained that as Haddam's and Killingworth's enrollments change, so can the allotted percentages.

Joan Gay questioned and Mrs. Iino verified that there is no determination as to how the property would be used. Mrs. Gay then asked if the map showing the 60 lots is an idea proposed by the Venuti family rather

than the Town. Mr. Venuti responded that he is selling open space and passive recreation for Killingworth residents only. Mrs. Gay noted some might find the subdivision map's purpose confusing.

Lynn Willey, Environmental Consultant, asked the Town to have an independent environmental review performed by a consultant hired by the Town prior to any purchase to ensure there are no areas of concern and provide liability protection. Mrs. Iino noted the purchase would be contingent upon an environmental review.

Gene Zarcone said that the CT ranks 50th among the states in terms of debt, and questioned the Town spending money based on a 2014 assessment. He stated that Killingworth's foreclosure rate is high, noted the state could dramatically cut Killingworth's funding, referenced the mill rate increase since he moved to town and summarized we cannot afford the property. Mr. Zarcone wanted to postpone the referendum. Moderator Gross clarified that the date of the referendum is not a topic open for discussion at the meeting and suggested he write a letter to the Board of Selectmen.

Suzanne Sack questioned housing starts in the past 5 years and asked how many buyers have tried to purchase the property. She went on to explain that the \$9M for renovations to the high school, approved in 2016, will be bonded early next year and will soon impact Killingworth's mill rate. Mr. Venuti stated several developers have tried to buy the property over the years but the family was not ready to sell it. Mrs. Sack stated she takes issue with the process and summarized that more facts are needed before approving the purchase, especially since other projects need to be done as well.

Michael Shear asked how many people currently in attendance attended the previous Public Hearing and toured the property and many in attendance raised their hands.

Rick O'Bymachow offered to sell 56 acres on Roast Meat Hill and Stevens Roads to the Town for \$2M.

Michelle Knockwood noted that the Venuti family has contributed quite a lot to the Town.

Michael Greenaway acknowledged it is a magnificent property, but his concern is the price. He added that he fears voting prematurely with few facts and much dissent will result in the referendum failing.

Peter Venuti explained that the family is trying to benefit the Town at this controlled price and because of this, Killingworth's house values will increase. He further noted that since the Board of Selectmen has not come up with a plan in 20 months, more time will not help.

Susan Flynn admits she doesn't have enough facts to decide how to vote. She suggested that zoning changes to allow for a light industrial/business park on part of the property could offset some of the cost and expenses associated with purchasing it. She also asked if regulations could be changed to expand the tax base and questioned if the water company and Hammonasset Fishing Assoc. pay taxes. Mrs. Iino explained open space regulations allow open space land to be taxed at a lower rate, clarified that the water company pays taxes and added that she doesn't know what the sportsman club pays.

Shawn Sisti explained this is a business, not emotional, purchase and warned the Town's finances are spiraling downward. He referenced Killingworth's new Plan of Conservation and Development showing population is declining, therefore fewer residents will be paying the bill (\$35,000/month for 20 years for the bond payments.) He cautioned not to take this purchase lightly because it is the largest purchase the town has ever made outside of the schools. Mr. Sisti further noted the property is beautiful, but we already have thousands of acres of land and if the town cannot afford maintenance, it will become overgrown and unusable. He asked if the bond company requires an appraisal and Mrs. Iino replied no. Mr. Sisti shared that a comparable property in Old Saybrook with open space and passive recreation was purchased for \$8,100/acre (equal to \$2.4M for 304 acres).

Don Venuti stated they want to do the best thing for the Town, but the alternative is 150 affordable houses which will require additional roads, plowing, police, etc. and will come at a great cost to the town.

Karen Gagliardi spoke about the need to maintain the rural integrity of the Town and explained that protecting this land is worth so much more than \$180 per year. She explained that there are no other properties quite like this one and cautioned that this particular property can never be replaced. Mrs. Gagliardi noted she moved to Killingworth, from a town that did not protect its land, because of its beauty and open space.

Lew Scranton discussed the 1998 vote to purchase this property and stated he would like nothing more than to see the Town purchase it but not at the current asking price. He does not believe we can afford it.

Wayne Davidovich asked if the referendum fails, is this the end of the proposed purchase or will it come up again. Mr. Venuti said he believes this would be the end but no one can predict the future.

Tia Manzi commented that the map should show the 4 parcels being voted on and in-depth discussion followed regarding the property's total acreage vs. the acreage of approved building lots. Mr. Venuti explained approximately 225 acres are suitable for high-density development based on soils. He agrees that the 60 large lots would take time to sell, however an alternate plan for 300-400 small state affordable housing lots could by-pass town land use regulations to meet the State's needs and would sell quickly bringing a different population to the town.

Jim Lally noted he has known this property for 50 years and added that the land comes with many valuable improvements by the Venuti's. Mr. Lally reminded the group that years ago a committee was formed and Parmelee Farm was purchased with the intention of building ball fields, but that did not happen. Instead, it turned into the gem we have today. He went on to detail the uniqueness of this property with its lake, trails, seeded areas, and more, and noted that this property is more valuable than simply open space.

Michelle Knockwood shared that as a former Housing Authority member, she would love to have more affordable housing options in Killingworth for the elderly, young families and others who currently cannot afford to live in Killingworth. She shared her opinion that the land is beautiful but asked those in attendance to think about the type of housing the Town really needs.

Rick O'Bymachow asked if and when the property had been on the open market. Mr. Venuti replied that it was on the market in 2005-2006 and he received 4 offers from developers. Mr. O'Bymachow suggested that the property be put back on the market but give the Town the first right of refusal on any purchase.

James Fretz summarized that the property is beautiful and believes many are concerned with its price only. He explained that a lower price might cost taxpayers a bit less than the projected \$180 per year but would not result in large savings.

Gene Zarcone again stated that people are moving from Killingworth, taxes are too high and expressed his perception that the Town is being threatened into purchasing the property. He summarized that the Town cannot afford the property and urged that the referendum date be changed because the people don't have the facts and figures needed to make a decision.

Heated discussion followed with out-of-order speakers and Chris O'Bymachow expressed her offense at an earlier statement by Mr. Venuti.

Tim Gannon noted the uniqueness of the property and shared his belief that it would add value to the Town, just as Parmelee Farm added value. He noted that the Venuti's have contributed much to the Town and feels we owe it to them to vote on the 25th as planned, and then move forward with the outcome.

Rosemarie Prelinger explained that the subdivision plan is not the Town's intention, but rather an alternative of the Venuti's. She further clarified that open space, ball fields, swimming and affordable housing are all options discussed at the last meeting. She shared her wish that the property belonged to the Town and questioned what would have happened if Hammonasset Beach had never been protected. Mrs. Prelinger urged voters to look to the future when land will be very scarce.

Patty Schaefer questioned the referendum process itself, asking what the exact question will be and whether there is a minimum percentage of voters who must turn out for the question to pass or fail. Mrs. lino explained that there is no quorum requirement at a referendum and clarified that the question is whether to authorize the Town to proceed with the purchase at \$6.25M (\$6.5M with costs added) if the property passes the environmental assessment, title search and other legal due diligence.

Joann Gorman asked if a specific plan for Parmelee Farm was formulated prior to its purchase, and Mrs. lino explained the process noting the original plan for the farm was voted down. Mrs. Gorman suggested that the Venuti land's use could be determined by committee after its purchase, like Parmelee Farm.

Todd Blewett asked the Selectmen why nothing was done in the 20 months that they were discussing the project noting it was not fair to the townspeople or to the Venuti's not to be better prepared.

Mrs. Iino explained that 20 months ago the Board of Selectmen decided that the Venuti family deserved an answer, and further decided not to invest money making plans before they knew if the town had an interest in purchasing the land. Selectman Nancy Gorski compared the question “what came first the chicken or the egg” to the question of whether to invest money before the purchase was approved, but she assured the group that usage plans will be formulated if the purchase is approved.

Selectman Lou Annino explained that the vote is about giving the Venuti’s, long-time Killingworth residents, an answer. He further explained that property appraisals can determine differing values so the real question is “what is the Town willing to pay for it?” Mr. Annino noted if the Town approves the purchase then the Town will control its use and an appropriate plan will be developed. He expressed his regret that the subdivision plan has been perceived as a threat, explaining that the intention was to demonstrate that the potential exists to put 60 lots on the property while meeting town zoning regulations. He also noted that affordable housing comes with increased costs to the Town while studies show that open space land retains property values and reduces needed services. He shared his personal belief that the Venuti family’s true intention is to see the Town enjoy the property.

Rebecca Rist-Brown shared her concern that the Board of Selectmen have not done their due diligence for 18 months and questioned if they are intentionally sabotaging the purchase by not providing the needed data to make a decision. Mrs. Iino assured there is no attempt to sabotage the vote and added that the State’s budget uncertainty delayed the vote.

Nathan Heath agreed that the property is beautiful and shared his perception that the Board of Selectmen has done the Town and the Venuti’s a disservice because necessary information is not available. He voiced his concern that many residents feel the same way and will therefore vote against the purchase.

Carl Berchtold shared his love of the property as well as his support for the purchase.

Cynthia Gode shared the many problems with her house and the cuts she has made to pay her bills, but she went on to express her support for the purchase as long as the Town, and not the State, controls its use.

Karen Gagliardi noted that the property has much potential for the Town and does not necessarily have to remain entirely open space. She explained that if the Town owns the property, it can be used as anything we need such as housing or a new Town Hall, in addition to open space, and could make money for the town.

Eileen Blewett, RSD#17 Board of Education member, noted that she is disturbed that so many in the room don’t want young families and young children to move into town.

Shawn Sisti reiterated that our population is declining and fewer people will be left to pay the cost to maintain the property. He further commented that the Land Trust and the Town do not maintain their property now, specifically the cranberry bogs, and noted that his own property value has gone down.

David Gumbart clarified the use and maintenance of the cranberry bogs.

In closing, Michael Venuti summarized that he maintains and mows the property himself, the roads are in very good shape, the beach has a new load of sand that he easily spread himself. He noted that he doesn’t want to discuss developments and stressed that the future is now in our hands. Mr. Venuti referenced the Plan of Conservation and Development and reviewed how the property meets multiple needs including stabilizing the tax base, providing open space and passive recreation and public swimming. He expressed his love of Killingworth and urged attendees to take this vote very seriously. Finally, he thanked the First Selectwoman and the Board of Selectmen for bringing the purchase to referendum.

Moderator David Gross thanked those in attendance and adjourned the meeting to a referendum on Tuesday, September 25, 2018, from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. at the Killingworth Elementary School.

Respectfully submitted,

Dawn Rees Mooney
Town Clerk